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Reagan tightens grip on public's right to know

WAFFLING, FUMBLING and behind-the-scene cheats may be occasionally redeemable acts when committed by American presidents. At least we've learned over time to think so.

It appears that every president since Franklin D. Roosevelt has had a hand in some sort of snookery—a distressing thought, and apparently true.

Likely no administration, however, has strived so fervently—and so openly—for a closed government as Ronald Reagan's has. According to the Society of Professional Journalists (a partisan group, yes, with a vested interest in gathering facts the government would rather not tell), this administration deserves "a failing grade" for its stance on almost every issue involving openness in government.

The administration "consistently took actions last year that would restrict the flow of information about the federal government to the people who pay for it," the group said late last month. The administration's behavior, it said, constituted "a fundamental assault on the First Amendment."

EDITORIAL

Besides holding fewer news conferences than any first-year president in at least 50 years, the journalists fault Reagan for his action on virtually every other "openness in government" subject: White House attempts to plug "politically inopportune news leaks," and claims that "executive privilege" applies to the entire executive branch "deliberative process" are troubling, of course. And CIA cutbacks on public information throw roadblocks in the way of citizens who want to know what the government is plotting.

But that's the least of it. Administration efforts to downgrade the Freedom of Information Act, making it easier for government to withhold information from the public, have been embraced by a Senate Judiciary subcommittee. And an executive order aiding government agencies in classifying information as "top secret" almost

at whim—and making declassification more difficult—smacks of pure secrecy.

Worst of all, perhaps, is the administration's support of the so-called "names of agents" bill—already passed by the House—which would, for the first time, criminalize the *publication* of information taken straight from *public* records. If it does become law, journalists, and ordinary citizens as well, could go to prison simply for writing down the names of CIA employees.

Next come the thought police. During the 1980 campaign, everyone remembers, Reagan vowed to "get government off the backs of the people." He has accomplished some of that in ways that suit him, violating a democratic precept at the same time. The people, as the journalists observed, are hardly in a position to hold their government accountable if they are prevented from learning what it is doing.

Openness is a requirement of democracy, and secrecy an American disaster.

—Kate Stanley

for The Minneapolis Star